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Missouri Transportation Department to seek toll on Interstate 70

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The Kansas City Star

As money for big, new road projects withers away, Missouri is looking seriously at tolls on Interstate 70 as a way to fund overhauling the highway from Kansas City to St. Louis.

Highway department Director Kevin Keith said Wednesday his agency would try to persuade the General Assembly to authorize the tolls.

"Tolling is a viable financing option for infrastructure," Keith said. "As we sit here today with the resources available to us, it may be the only option we have to pay for it."

Keith said the transportation department would like to form a partnership where a consortium of contractors would come together and build the highway and then recoup their expenses from tolls.

Just how much the tolls would be and who would establish them would have to be worked out in an agreement with any potential group that would be interested in the idea.

For more than 10 years, planners have been looking at how to rehab and expand I-70 across Missouri.

Built at the birth of the federal interstate system more than 50 years ago, I-70 has been wearing out, no longer able to meet the demands of exploding freight and passenger traffic.

Options have ranged from a basic expansion to three lanes each way to a more elaborate project that includes segregated truck lanes.

The cost ranges anywhere from \$1.5 billion up to \$4 billion depending on what Missouri wants to build. However, the highway department is now focused mostly on maintenance after exhausting the Amendment 3 money that voters approved in 2004.

Amendment 3 allowed the state to borrow \$2 billion by moving some motor vehicle sales taxes from the general fund to roads. The state is using that money to repay the bonds that funded the work credited for improving Missouri highways in recent years.

The financing problem is worsened because revenues coming into the state are relatively flat and unable to keep up with inflation. There's also uncertainty about when Congress will get around to passing a new transportation bill.

MoDOT's decision to seek tolling authority drew praise from the Show-Me Institute, a conservative think-tank in St. Louis that has promoted public-private partnerships.

"I'm excited they're moving forward with it," said David Stokes, a policy analyst for the institute. "The people who use the roads will pay for the roads."

Toll roads are employed in more than two dozen states, including neighboring Kansas, which is studying the possibility of using tolls to help pay for a planned bypass around Lawrence.

But toll roads have drawn opposition from the trucking industry and from some critics in Congress who think they're a form of double taxation because the public is paying for the same public asset twice.

"Tolls in our view are a fairly inefficient way to pay for highways in general," said Sean McNally, spokesman for the American Trucking Association in Washington.

McNally said that toll roads force governments to create new layers of administrative bureaucracy that aren't necessary when you're paying for roads with more traditional methods like fuel taxes.

McNally said 1 cent to 2 cents of every dollar generated through gas taxes goes to administrative costs, compared

with 15 to 20 cents of every dollar generated with tolls.

Sen. Bill Stouffer is a Napton Republican and chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee in the Missouri General Assembly. He said the state needs to figure a way to pay for roads, but he was skeptical about how far the plan would get in the legislature.

"We need to have the discussion and the debate," Stouffer said Wednesday. "It's one of those really tough questions I don't have an answer to."

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